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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/21/2015, The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 4:35-41

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My morning sermon this morning is based on our Gospel Lesson and begins with the great wonderstruck question at the end of the story. The disciples in the boat are the ones who ask the question. It goes this way:

⁴¹And they were filled with awe, and said to one another,
“Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?” (Mark
4:41, RSV)

Answer: this is Jesus — our own Savior. It is the answer I want our young people being confirmed today to take to heart. I want them to take it to heart and to feel safe as they go on in this world. It is the answer I want each of us to take to heart: The One whom even wind and sea obey is our Savior Jesus. He is our Good Shepherd. He is the great Captain of our ship. And we ride through this world safe with him, however much the winds and the waves should threaten us.

Our Confirmands are growing up. Here they are, sitting right in front of me. They are growing in power, in learning, and in rambunctiousness. We can all sense the growth in them. Teaching Catechism to teenagers is sometimes like riding a wild bronco for the teacher. It is like its own storm on the sea. And maybe that is how it should be! We want our young people to grow in energy, in self-confidence, and in sheer joyfulness. Before long, our Confirmands will be in high school, and then maybe to college, and then on into life. They are preparing to set out on great adventures, as we older folk did back in our day. But in setting sail in life, they are almost certain to encounter their own fair share of storms on the sea. Wind and wave will batter them, as it has battered many a human being. To be a fisherman is to get to know storms. To be a voyager is to get to know storms and wind and threatening waves. Our message to you young people today, and to each of us older folks too, is that if you should find yourself caught in a storm, remember that Jesus is in your little boat with you, and so you will be okay. Just keep trying to be good in his name. You will be okay.

I have two themes for us today. First, we suffer storms in life — storms so fierce or so soul-disturbing that we might be tempted to think that Jesus has left our little boat, and now we are alone to face a cold, indifferent universe. My other theme is simply that it isn't so. We might be so pressed in life that the cry will be wrung out from us:

Master, carest thou not that we perish? (Mark 4:38, KJV)

But Jesus does care. It is as the golden verse says: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him *should not perish*, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16, KJV) Though Jesus should seem absent from our little boat in the midst of the storm, he is not absent. He will never be absent. And because of his goodness, we are bound to come at last to that sea in which there is a great calm, where even the winds and the waves obey him.

STORMS THAT TRY OUR SOULS

So, my first theme is that as we go on in life, our Confirmands - and we along with them - might encounter storms that are going to try our souls. These storms are going to be so fierce or so disturbing that we will be left wondering whether God has forgotten all about us. Indeed, perhaps some of us are caught up in such a storm even now.

So, let me try to remind us of something that I hope will lift our hearts if ever we should fear that the Lord has forgotten us. To do this, I want to begin by noting that our God is both fatherly and motherly, and in both ways, he forgets us not! Let me lift up two passages along these lines. The first one likens God to a father. The second one likens God to a mother. Both are great passages of comfort in the Bible.

The first one, about the fatherly nature of God, is from Psalm 103 and goes this way:

¹³As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him. ¹⁴For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. (Psalm 103:13-14, RSV)

Our God, then, is like the compassionate father who gathers up his robes and dashes out to welcome home his prodigal son (Luke 15).

And here's my second text — the one that likens God to a mother, a mother who certainly cannot forget her child, even if that child should be caught in some terrible storm on the sea. This passage comes from Isaiah 49:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (Isaiah 49:15, NRSV)

Or again, Jesus does not hesitate to speak of his own love as that of a mother, as in his lament over Jerusalem:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (Matthew 23:37, RSV)

It is the nature of a many a mother to have compassion on her children. She does not forget them. She stands ready to gather her brood under her wings. Let the hawk swoop down and attack her. Let that hawk even kill her. She means to defend her brood to her dying day.

So it is with us even when our little boat is beaten badly by the storms of life. We might think that God is absent, God is distant, God is unaware, God does not care about us. But it is not so. In all honesty we might cry out, “Master, do you not care that I perish?” Things might get that bad! It might seem to us that we are grist for the mill, that we are going to be blown away by the storm, and that we are going to be dashed to pieces on the awful boulders near the shore. And maybe we will! But if so, it will not be because God desires our death, but rather because our ship is badly sailed. Or, short of a miracle, the regularities by which God rules his creation mean that if we jump off the cliff, we are going to fall. Or if the deranged gunman comes barging into the church undercroft and shoots everybody in sight, we are going to die. Or if illness runs wild in our bodies, we are going to suffer. It is natural, then, to cry out, “Master, do you not care that I perish?” It is a haunting, human question. But our God is the one Isaiah speaks of. Our God is the one who can as little forget us as a mother can forget the child nursing at her breast.

OUR GOD DOES NOT FORGET

And so we come to our second theme: Our God, the true God, never forgets us, not even for a moment. And he never gives up on his plan to save us. All obstacles will fade before his great motherly and fatherly love. He will work things out that we do not perish, but have everlasting life.

To develop this theme, let me begin by sharing an exclamation from one of our Confirmands when we were rehearsing the Confirmation liturgy. This happened a few weeks ago. After the liturgy, our Confirmands gathered with me in the chancel and we walked our way through the liturgy. I encouraged them to use a good strong voice when I ask them this dramatic question:

☐ Do you this day, in the presence of God and of this Christian congregation, confirm the solemn covenant which at your Baptism you made with the Triune God?

☒ *(one at a time)* I do!

In a few minutes, we are going to witness this holy question and answer for each of our Confirmands.

So, when we were rehearsing, I urged our kids to use a good strong voice when answering “I do!” And then one of our Confirmands – I think it was Kirsten Kibler - cried out, “Wait, this sounds like marriage! I do! It sounds like we’re getting married.”

To which I answered, “That’s right! That’s perfect! That goes to the heart of the matter.” We have been through this, many of us. We too have been confirmed. And when we were confirmed, young as we were, we pledged our love to Jesus. For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health, we pledged to be true to Jesus.

And the great thing is that he pledged his love to us too. Our Confirmand was right to detect the marriage imagery at play here. It is because of Baptism and Holy Confirmation that the church is called “the Bride of Christ,” and Jesus is called the Bridegroom.

And Jesus who pledges himself to us in love is not about to forget us, even if the storms on the sea batter us to pieces. Take a look! There he is, asleep in the stern of the boat. He has not abandoned the boat. He has not walked away on the water, leaving us to fend for ourselves. He is there, asleep on the cushion. And to use the wonderful words of an old preacher, “Jesus sleeps, but he never oversleeps.”¹

Furthermore, if our boat goes down, he goes down with it... except that none of that business anymore! Jesus has already suffered death on the Cross. His heavenly Father is not about to let him sink again. We are safe precisely because Jesus is still in the boat with us. Who knows what the coming years will hold? But we can be sure that Jesus will be in the boat with us.

Let me offer a few more Biblical images of Christ being with us even when we fear that he has left us. For one, think of Elisha’s servant of old — the poor fellow who gets up in the morning, beholds a great enemy army with horses and chariots surrounding the city, and cries out:

“Alas, my master! What shall we do?”

Claim Elisha’s answer for yourself. Claim the master’s boldness for yourself! Claim what Elisha says:

¹⁶He said, “Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” ¹⁷Then Elisha prayed, and said, “O LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see.” So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha. (2 Kings 6:14-17, RSV)

All seemed to be lost, but it was not, because the Lord is with us, even in the darkest hours.

Let me lift up one last passage along these lines. It is a Bible reading that the pastor’s prayer book suggests when visiting someone in the hospital. It speaks of passing through the waters, the frightening waters:

¹ Charles Spurgeon, “Christ Asleep In The Vessel,” 1873

¹But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isaiah 43:1-3, RSV)

Such encouraging passages as these are meant both for the church and for our Confirmands and for each of us. Take our little church, for example. Sometimes I fear that too much is going on at this time. Too much! Construction and real estate and the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). It is not entirely season of peace and calm for us. We will sort things out in Immanuel’s usual thoughtful and careful way, but meanwhile, it feels that we are in a storm on the sea — winds and waves and all kinds of hurly-burley.

But let it be so. The fact of a storm does not mean the absence of Christ, nor the absence of his help or his determination to see us safely through to the other side.

And then for each of us, for each individual Christian, there might be a lot going on in our lives at this time. Storms might be a blow’in on us. Being young like our Confirmands does not guarantee that all is well. Youth does not guarantee peace. In fact, no stretch of life is guaranteed to be easy for us. But what we are guaranteed is that our God will neither forsake us nor forget us. So let us labor on through the storms. Let us put our backs into the oars, trim our sails, and keep our eye on our North Star who will certainly lead us to safety, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.